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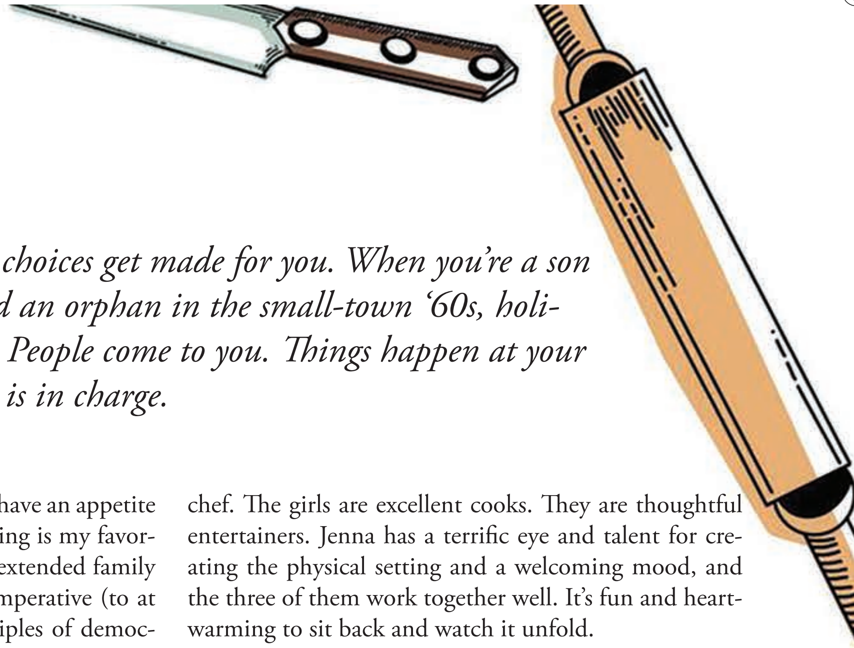

*When you're a kid, choices get made for you. When you're a son of an only child and an orphan in the small-town '60s, holiday calculus is easy. People come to you. Things happen at your house. Your mother is in charge.*

Later, things get more complicated. I have an appetite for control and my own food, and cooking is my favorite hobby, so I'm inclined to coerce the extended family to come to me. But I understand the imperative (to at least attempt) to subscribe to the principles of democracy where major holidays are concerned. So, over the years, Thanksgiving has come in several forms. Trips to California for in-law buffets. Relatively small gatherings at my mother's table. A blended group at a club. And, of course, me in my kitchen making too many courses and too much mess.

When your kids are no longer children (except in your distorted mind's eye) and they take mates, all bets are off. You hope they choose you…your house…your traditions; you recognize feeling this way is selfish so you try to suppress it; you experience guilt at the slightest hint of resentment that you are no longer the sun around which orbit the planets of your domain; and, ultimately, you take and celebrate what you get. Which is made easier and more palatable when you genuinely appreciate and adore the new additions to your sacred family core (and I do).

My mom reluctantly ceded control of the holidays a couple of decades ago. Still, old habits die hard. "I'm getting the turkey," she texts me and/or the kids at some point every year. It takes several iterations and various versions of "no" to land on something simpler for everyone. "Okay. At least I'll make a dessert." (These sweet treats – think Greek wedding cookies and gooey brownies – are always sinfully and addictively good.)

Some families like to eat Thanksgiving dinner early – we are among them, or so we identify. But "early" means different things to different people. My parents would be happy with noon. My girls prefer to be in the middle of a many-mile walk at that hour (and so do I.) Five is "early" for most of us. Three sits right in the middle. Somehow, we usually land on 4.

This year, we will replicate a plan that has found temporary permanence for our group. My daughters are flying in from their respective cities and cooking for everyone at our house. I like this solution, even though it relieves me of the pleasures associated with my duties as chef. The girls are excellent cooks. They are thoughtful entertainers. Jenna has a terrific eye and talent for creating the physical setting and a welcoming mood, and the three of them work together well. It's fun and heartwarming to sit back and watch it unfold.

With age comes both wisdom and acceptance. But neither comes easy nor without reversions to stubborn stupidity, at times. The fundamental truth worth remembering when we plan for the holidays: It's not as much the when or where or what as it is the who. I'm fortunate to have both my parents close by, and Jenna's here, too. I'm blessed to have daughters with whom I'm close. I'm happy about the young men they have chosen. I'm very grateful for a loving and fun-to-be-with wife. When the time comes, I'll be over-the-moon thankful for my grandchildren. It won't much matter who cooks.

To contact us with your ideas, responses, letters and more, email us at mail@theskinnie.com





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